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Agriculture Mission Offers New Hope For Young Urban "Incorrigibles"

Tommy, a young man who grew up in the squalor of the big city, was so much of a problem that nobody, it seemed, could deal with him. As a last resort he chose to go to the agricultural project (located in Guyana), and today he is a skilled worker, in charge of acres of gardens, with major responsibilities in a livestock development program he has helped set up.

He is just one of 121 "incorrigible" youths who have succeeded in a changed environment, in which they were given useful, rewarding work and training, a feeling of being cared for, and in which they discovered for the first time that they could really accomplish something worthwhile.

From every indication, it is certain that, without this program, many of the youths who have gone to Guyana would today be part of the crime problem in our city--some would right now be engaged, not only in theft and vandalism, but also in much more serious crime.

The temple's project is located on several thousand acres in the lush interior of the newly developing nation. The land is rapidly being transformed from virgin jungle into productive cropland and pasture. More than 200 varieties of vegetables, fruits, and nuts are being cultivated. Cattle, chickens, and pigs are raised. A fully equipped and professionally staffed medical clinic is in the works, and a sawmill and cassava processing plant have been constructed.

The community surrounding these projects is a busy cooperative; native Guyanese live and work along with the North Americans in a lifestyle that combines work, recreation, and cultural enrichment, in a natural setting.

The project has been visited and enthusiastically praised by both Guyanese and American officials.

The positive, healthful, and natural environment has proved remarkably successful in bringing about fundamental changes in individuals considered "hopeless cases" in settings where there were frustration, alienation, and very few opportunities.

One of the project coordinators says, "Our experience with the Guyana project and the dramatic changes that have come over the lives of the young people who have participated there have made us 'environmental determinists,' so to speak. We are convinced that a change in the physical and social conditions in which a child grows up play a critical role in shaping the personality."

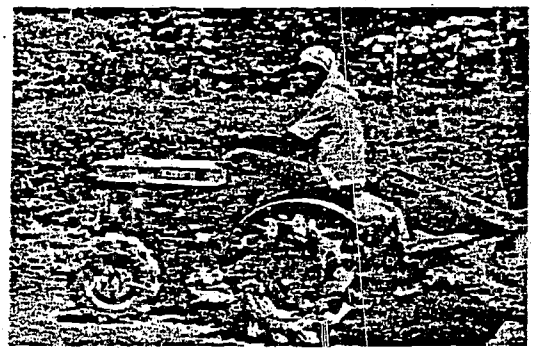
Prisons, where the environment reinforces and significantly hardens the negative, destructive patterns of inmates, contribute to the problem. Rev. Jim Jones, who initiated the Guyana project, warns that "we had better, as a society, begin seriously to explore and develop environments and social structures that attack the problem at the roots. The setting of despair, violence, and poverty that characterizes inner cities is the culprit. The prisons merely release their inmates back into the environment, bitter, and with the stigma of 'ex-con.' What else can we expect but a high recidivism rate?

"It is time for society," Jones continued, "to break this vicious circle. It is time to develop alternatives, such as co-operative communities where real rehabilitation can take place, where young people can be given a chance to develop their talents rather than having them frustrated and channeled into criminal and antisocial patterns. It could be that initiatives in this area might become a starting point for larger efforts to solve the problem of decaying inner cities, and the ghettoization of its residents.

"It is time to take a cue from organizations that are building such communities, which are not only pointing out social ills, not only discussing and proposing meaningful remedies, but making them work to bring about practical solutions. If we don't make a beginning, time, money, and lives will continue to be wasted in futile efforts to make outmoded and ineffective formulas work."

Jones also feels some discomfort about the fact that the public is receiving what can only be termed a form of brainwashing through so many TV shows. Popular programing has had the effect of encouraging people to reject others who are not "normal" or well adjusted, to consider them as somehow socially unacceptable, thus providing a ready-made justification for their removal from society, for punitive incarceration. Even people who are mentally ill, he notes, are being put in this category and are regarded as not quite "human."

The Guyana project, Rev. Jones feels, could serve as a model for similar experiments here in the United States. "We need to humanize our institutions and see people as not essentially bad or 'incorrigible,' but as victims of environment....and we need to do something about that environment."



Wearing a home-made cap, Tommy heads for the gardens on the utility tractor. Once a so-called "incorrigible" victim of poverty's downward cycle, he now supervises several workers and a 60-acre vegetable garden that sustains the project volunteers.